
HORIZON SCHOOL DIVISION**POLICY HANDBOOK**

Policy Code:	HNB
Policy Title:	Controversial Issues in the Classroom
Cross Reference:	HGAE, HGAC, HNA
Legal Reference:	Education Act (S.58), Alberta Human Rights Act (S. 11.1)
Adoption Date:	February 26, 1997
Amendment or Re-affirmation Date:	December 13, 2001 February 25, 2014

POLICY

THE BOARD OF TRUSTEES OF HORIZON SCHOOL DIVISION BELIEVES THAT STUDYING CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES IS IMPORTANT IN PREPARING STUDENTS TO PARTICIPATE IN A DEMOCRATIC AND PLURALISTIC SOCIETY.

DEFINITION

Controversial issues are those topics that are publicly sensitive and upon which there is no consensus of values or beliefs. They include topics on which reasonable people may sincerely disagree. Opportunities to deal with these issues are an integral part of student learning in Alberta.

GUIDELINES

1. Studying controversial issues provides opportunities to develop the ability to think clearly, to reason logically, to open-mindedly and respectfully examine different points of view and to make sound judgments.
2. Teachers, students and others participating in studies or discussions of controversial issues need to exercise sensitivity to ensure that students and others are not ridiculed, embarrassed or intimidated for positions that they hold on controversial issues.
3. Controversial issues:
 - 3.1 represent alternative points of view, subject to the condition that information presented is not restricted by any federal or provincial law
 - 3.2 reflect the maturity, capabilities and educational needs of the students
 - 3.3 meet the requirements of provincially prescribed and approved courses and programs of study and education programs
 - 3.4 reflect the neighborhood and community in which the school is located, as well as provincial, national and international contexts.
4. Controversial issues that have been anticipated by the teacher, and those that may arise incidentally during instruction should be used by the teacher to promote critical inquiry and/or to teach thinking skills.

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5. The school plays a supportive role to parents in the areas of values and moral development and shall handle parental decisions in regard to controversial issues with respect and sensitivity.
6. The teacher shall present full and fair opportunity and means for students to study, consider, organize, discuss and evaluate all sides of controversial issues including, but not limited to political philosophies.
7. Controversial issues regarding Religion and Human Sexuality which require parent notice are addressed under Policy HGAE: Religion and Human Sexuality, Policy HGAC: Religious Instruction, Policy HNA: Lord's Prayer, Section 11.1 of the *Alberta Human Rights Act* and section 50 of the *Education Act* which allows boards to prescribe religious instruction to be offered to students.

REGULATIONS

1. Criteria for Determining Appropriateness of Controversial Issues For the School Curriculum.

- 1.1 The topics selected for study shall contribute to the major purposes of the school curriculum and shall be allotted only that amount of time required for a satisfactory study by the class.
- 1.2 The topics discussed shall reflect the neighborhood and community in which the school is located as well as the provincial, national, and international context.
- 1.3 Questions to be addressed shall be considered within the range of the knowledge, maturity, and competence of the particular students involved.
- 1.4 Problems and issues selected for discussion and study shall be current, significant, and of interest to students.
- 1.5 Materials shall be available on all sides of the issues which will represent alternative points of view.

2. Rights and Responsibilities of the Student

- 2.1 Students have the right to study and discuss controversial issues and problems in a class atmosphere devoid of partisanship and bias.
- 2.2 Students have the responsibility to learn and practice the techniques of participatory democracy in preparation for carrying out the duties of intelligent, involved citizens.
- 2.3 Students have a right to an explanation by the teacher if an issue is not to be studied.
- 2.4 Students have a responsibility to undertake the study of all sides of an issue, to listen to other viewpoints with an open mind, and to evaluate issues on an intellectual, rather than an emotional basis.

3. Rights and Responsibilities of the Teacher

- 3.1 The teacher shall determine whether the issue raised is to be considered at the moment; whether there will be time to explore the issue sufficiently; what the relation of the problem to be considered is to the course or the curriculum; whether the students are prepared or ready to study the issue; and whether the teacher is prepared to discuss and present it effectively.

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- 3.2 The students shall be instructed in the importance of the reason for considering controversial issues. If an issue is not to be studied, the teacher has an obligation to explain the reasons.
- 3.3 The teacher, as a moderator and a participant, shall point out the possibility of errors in statements of students and writers and the possibility of alternative points of view. The teacher shall try to ensure that all facts, evidence, and aspects of an issue are honestly presented and that students are helped to evaluate their sources of information, as well as their own procedures and conclusions.
- 3.4 Teachers have the right to express their opinions, providing the students understand that it is opinion and not an authoritative answer. Teachers will not attempt to limit or control the judgment of pupils directly or indirectly.
- 3.5 The teacher shall uphold, protect, and defend the fundamental freedoms of our Canadian democratic way of life.

4. Rights and Responsibilities of Administration

- 4.1 A teacher who is in doubt about the appropriateness of discussing certain controversial issues in the classroom or regarding his or her ability to explore such issues shall confer with the Principal. If the Principal and teacher are unable to agree, the matter shall be referred to the Superintendent or designate to make a decision.
- 4.2 No group or individual has the right, without authorization, to present argument, for or against any issue under study, directly to students or to the class. The teacher, however, may invite representatives of different viewpoints to appear before the class to discuss their opinions, after obtaining approval of the Principal.

5. Guest Speakers and Presentations

- 5.1 Prior to allowing an individual, or group to address a class or body of students, teachers and administrators shall ensure that:
 - 5.1.1 the topic and content of the speech or presentation shall not provoke unwarranted controversy;
 - 5.1.2 the topic and content are aligned with the Alberta Program of Studies;
 - 5.1.3 the topic and content do not promote hate or intolerance toward any group or individual;
 - 5.1.4 when practical, the parents of students involved have been informed of the name(s) of the presenter(s) and the topic/content; and
 - 5.1.5 any parental request for non-participation of their student is honored.